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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses what teacher education programs can do to prepare teachers for diverse classrooms. One approach is through cooperative learning, since children come to school with various orientations to cooperative behavior. Many teachers, however, jump into cooperative activities with little thought of the behaviors needed by students to work together. Helping children understand the value of cooperative learning and teaching appropriate behaviors for group work and group success need to be a major goal of the teacher. Teacher preparation programs should lead the way in modeling and teaching cooperative techniques. A majority of teachers experience failure when using cooperative learning due to a lack of preparation of their students in social skills. Prosocial behavior should transfer to other activities children engage in; if taught correctly, children should maintain the same behavior in any other situation. Since teachers are called upon to produce not only good learners but good people, teaching children to cooperate at school will transfer to home, play, and eventually to work. Also presented are selected success stories of teachers' experiences with cooperative education. (Contains 8 references.) (LL)

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INFUSING A MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE IN TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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Infusing a Multicultural Perspective in Teacher Education Through Cooperative Learning

Cheryl K. Didham

While U.S. society has continued to become more and more culturally pluralistic, most U.S. campuses have not. The 1980's showed a decrease in minority enrollment at many universities and faculties have remained predominately white and male (Garcia, 1992). This mismatch between the composition of our society and the composition of teacher education programs can cause a problem in how multicultural education is viewed. To many non-minority faculty, multiculturalism may mean recovering lost histories, improving self esteem for minority children or just limiting studies to African - Americans or a few other minorities.

If we look at diversity in light of change, we can see that not only is our country changing but the schools, the family, children and childhood are also changing (Cruickshank, Baines, Metcalf, 1993). When we look at student diversity, we see that this includes much more than skin color or ethnicity. Our schools must teach children who are different not only by cultural, but by SES, development, gender, exceptionality and learning styles. And teaching this variety of children is only one piece, we must also teach them to accept one another and work together in school and out.

What can teacher education programs do to prepare teachers for such a diverse classroom? How can they celebrate diversity and still be successful with all children in their class?

One approach might be through Cooperative Learning. Children come to school with various orientations to cooperative behavior. Some cultures stress the value of working together as a team while others do not. Cooperative Learning may be the key to implementing an atmosphere of team spirit in the classroom.

The normal American classroom places students in competition with each other and offers few opportunities to learn the strategies needed to participate in groups (Didham, 1991). Cooperative learning allows a student to learn the rules of group work and experience the interdependence necessary for success. It can promote a subjective sense of group identity, a greater acceptance of people who are different from oneself and a more sophisticated ability to imagine others points of view. It can also encourage trust, sensitivity, open communication and prosocial activity (Kohn, 1991). As Bernagozzi (1988) states, when students are allowed to support each other in mixed ability groups, they learn a lot more than just their lessons. They also gain in self-esteem and become far more accepting of each other and their individual differences.

Many teachers begin using cooperative learning to enhance their teaching and because they have read that it can improve academic performance. The development of prosocial values is an unintended bonus for many (Kohn, 1991). One of the most consistent findings on the effects of cooperative learning is on intergroup relations. When students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds are grouped together to work toward a common goal they gain in liking and respect for one another. There are also

gains in social acceptance of mainstreamed and academically handicapped students (Slavin, 1989/90). We know too, that social skills are directly related to building and maintaining positive relationships and to keeping psychological health. When teachers encourage social skills in their classrooms they also increase a student's employability, career success, quality of future relationships, and psychological health (Johnson and Johnson, 1989/90).

Many teachers, however, jump into cooperative activities with little thought of the behavior needed by the students to successfully work together. Many have attended some short workshop and have gathered a collection of fun activities intended to motivate the students and improve any lesson being taught. When students fail to act appropriately, teachers often feel that groups will not work in their classrooms or that their mix of children just cannot handle group work. Little thought is given to teaching the necessary social skills because this was not stressed in the workshop.

In reviewing graduate student projects and visiting classrooms, this author found that the majority of teachers had failures or partial failures when using cooperative learning due to lack of preparation of students in social skills. One teacher commented: "I am fairly pleased with the behavior during group activities in the classroom but that behavior doesn't transfer to other areas such as behavior in the hallway or in the cafeteria. Prosocial behavior should transfer to other activities the

children do. If cooperative learning is taught correctly, the children should maintain the same behavior in any other situation. Many studies have verified this.

Helping children understand the value of cooperative learning and exhibit the appropriate behaviors for group work and group success should be a major goal of the teacher. Improving relationships within a diverse class (and all classrooms are diverse) will make it easier for a teacher to not only teach but to actually celebrate diversity.

Teacher preparation programs should lead the way in modeling and teaching cooperative techniques. Both undergraduate and graduate classes at OSU do both. Undergraduate students learn group cooperation by participating in a 2-3 week unit where they are assigned to groups and learn to teach the skills and structures as they participate in group assignments. A graduate class in cooperative learning spends one quarter doing the same as they take each technique they have learned back to their own classrooms. Teachers who participated in the graduate classes taught everything from pre-first to high school vocational agriculture and independent living classes. One hundred percent of them had successes, improvement in grades and were excited about what cooperative learning was doing for their students. Many of them introduced the concept of cooperating without first teaching the social skills. They found that going back and discussing, modeling and reviewing appropriate behaviors solved most discipline problems. Everyone stated that when they began school the following year they would begin with more time spent on social skills and would incorporate cooperative learning in more subject areas.

Lower grade teachers found that groups of 2 worked best with 2 groups merging into a group of 4 for variety. One first grade teacher used cooperative learning when writing stories. The cooperative activity improved behavior and peer relationships which extended to other activities. She found students seeking their group partners for help in other subject areas.

A high school vocational education teacher found that even his class needed a social skill review. He then used jigsaw to review the use of power tools with each team member explaining either 1) name, parts and adjustments, 2) method of operation or 3) safety rules and methods. His new technique was more interesting than his own lecture and resulted in a 15 point improvement in overall grades.

Another high school English teacher incorporates base groups into each of her classes. She feels that the accountability for each other in the base group as well as other cooperative learning activities has improved overall grades for her classes.

Students in a high school English class worked cooperatively to rewrite and perform Dickens' A Christmas Carol. The teacher received calls from four sets of parents stating that students were very excited about the project and were really enjoying the class. Students became so involved that some gave up extra activities to plan and practice together. If a student became ill members from the group called to urge him/her back to class. Grades for the project were all A's and B's.

In an Algebra II class a teacher changed an unstructured weekly "work" day to one of structured cooperative learning. Students later admitted that they worked harder so as not to be embarrassed in their group or so not to let team members down. Two students who were failing the course improved grades to 80%. Some

higher achievers complained about being penalized for the poorer achievers but overall grades improved dramatically.

Other success stories were told for the middle grades, art classes and even bowling classes. Lower grade teachers stressed the value of processing after each class, particularly when things went wrong or groups had problems. One young student in the class was recently graduated but still unemployed. She told of a lesson she taught during student teaching. She now understood why her groups had not worked and what she had to do prior to teaching the lesson again. She was anxious to try again approaching it from cooperative learning and first teaching the skills she wanted to see the children use.

All participating teachers agreed that cooperative learning had become an integral part of their teaching strategy. All found that it improved grades and helped promote better relationships among the students in their classes. This may be the key to better performance and behavior in our schools. Research shows that when students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds work together toward a common goal, they gain in liking and respect for each other. (Slavin, 1989/90). Other bonuses include increased friendships, a gain in self esteem and a better liking of school and the subject studied. Additional studies by Dr. Millard Madsen in Mexico found that competition increases with urbanization (Brandt, 1989/90). Children from rural Mexico were more cooperative than those from urban parts of Mexico. This seemed to be true world-wide. When cooperative learning teams were used in classrooms there was a reversal of the tendency toward increasing competition and an increase toward more pro-social behavior among the students.

Can schools produce more caring, cooperative kids? Research tells us "yes" and cooperative learning may be a very important first step. In 1939 philosopher Martin Bieber told a gathering of teachers that education worthy of the name is essentially education of character (Kohn, 1991). This does not mean that teachers should develop a unit on manners or values or morals. It means that the very profession of teaching calls on teachers to produce not only good learners but good people. Cooperative learning may make learning more fun and increase grades but the improvement in social behavior may be more important. Teaching children to cooperate at school will transfer to home and play and eventually to work. Perhaps this is the most important skill we can and should teach children in today's world.

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